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ABSTRACT

To assess the relation between role perception and persuasion tactics, 58 first and third graders were asked to describe: (a) their mother, teacher and friend; (b) how they would persuade each of these individuals in different situations; and (c) how these others would persuade them. Results suggest that children are able to differentiate among these roles, specify persuasion strategies that vary by target and indicate tactics others would use on them; they are not able to coordinate their knowledge of the motives of individuals in these roles to use as issues in persuading. Classroom and playground observation indicated moderate correspondence between verbal responses and behavior. (Author)

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# ROLE PERCEPTION AND USE OF PERSUASION STRATEGIES BY CHILDREN

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Abstract

To assess the relation between role perception and persuasion tactics, fifty-eight first and third graders were asked: (a) to describe their mother, teacher and friend, (b) how they would persuade each of these individuals in different situations; and (c) how these others would persuade them. Results suggest that children are able to differentiate among these roles, specify persuasion strategies that vary by target and indicate tactics others would use on them, but not able to coordinate their knowledge of the motives of individuals in these roles to use as issues in persuading. Classroom and playground observation indicated moderate correspondence between verbal responses and behavior.

Recently a major focus of research has centered on the emotionally temperate rather than disruptive means a child may use to influence the behavior of others (e.g. Spivak and Shure, 1974). Effective persuasion is certainly one adaptive prosocial method the child can employ to attain his goals. Social psychologists and sociologists have emphasized this behavior in their theories of exchange, ingratiation, bargaining and attitude change (Blau 1964, Homans, 1961; Hovland and Janis, 1959; London, 1973). In all these formulations the assumption is that the effective actor tries to influence the other to gain some desired response from him.

Feffer (1970), in a developmental analysis of interpersonal behavior, has suggested that successful interaction requires that an individual take account of his own point of view, that of the other, and the particular situation in which the interaction occurs. In persuasion, it is necessary for the individual to use similar skills; attention must be paid to the point of view of the other, especially the role of the other, the individualistic style of the other in the role, and the constraints of the particular situation. For example, in trying to persuade a teacher to alter an assignment one would have to consider the teacher's motivation to promote learning. In addition, the student needs to know if the teacher is likely to be flexible and regard alternative suggestions with favor, as well as whether

the situation allows for options in terms of such factors as available time and resources. Other considerations are necessary if the persuadee is a parent or friend. The issue is: on what basis do children decide to use particular tactics to persuade and around what issues are their strategies likely to be constructed?

Although information concerning the development of each of these factors is available, little is known about how or when they are coordinated. Evidence from studies of role and person perception (reviewed by Livesley and Bromley, 1973) indicate that older children use more abstract terms to describe individuals and increase in their knowledge of others' motivational systems. Other work (e.g. Flavell, et. al., 1968; Selman, 1971; Shantz, 1976) has documented that taking the perspective of the other is a critical prerequisite to effective social communication and that this ability also increases with age. Results of previous investigations (Bragg, et. al., 1973; Braginsky, 1970; Clark and Delia, 1976; Finley and Humphreys, 1974; and Wood, et. al., 1967) have described age changes in the frequency with which specific persuasive behaviors occur and how they vary depending upon the age or status of the target.

More specifically, Clark and Delia (1976) have suggested findings showing differences in degree of elaboration of a persuasive communication directed toward mothers as compared to

strangers may be a function of familiarity with the persuadee and greater predictability of the reaction. Undoubtedly, knowledge of the expectations of significant others is indispensible so that the child can predict how others will react to his requests and thereby guide his own behaviors in negotiating. However, we have little information about how youngsters modify their persuasive strategies in accord with their perceptions of significant others or how they perceive the types of tactics and strategies others would use when persuading them.

Consequently, the present study was designed to answer the following questions: (a) What information does the child possess about factors that are likely to influence significant others (mothers, teachers and friends)? (b) Does he differentiate persuasion tactics according to the role of the individual he is trying to persuade? (c) Do the issues chosen by the child as the basis for persuasion relate to his view of expectations as well as additional factors likely to be important to others? (d) What is the child's perceptions of the tactics others would use in persuading him? and (e) Are his perceptions of the issues others would invoke congruent with his view of their expectations?

## Method

### Subjects

Thirty-three first graders (18 boys, 15 girls) and 25 third graders (12 girls, 13 boys) from several different classrooms were interviewed. All children were white, middle class and attended a public elementary school in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

### Procedure

Each subject was interviewed individually by an adult female. During the first session, to assess role differentiation, the child was asked, "Tell me four things that make your mother happy (angry, scared)." The same questions were repeated for teacher and friend. Order of presentation for role and emotion was controlled.

Responses were recorded verbatim, the number of different statements mentioned counted, and the specific issues themselves coded. For example, if a child said, "my mother is happy when I make my bed" and "my mother gets mad when I don't make my bed" these statements were counted only once. The issue coded was "housework." Types of issues coded include good behavior, school performance, helping, and obeying rules. In addition, all statements were scored on a three point scale according to level of abstractness. Thus, the above example would be rated as specific in contrast to a more general response about housework such as "my mother is happy when I do my cleaning chores."

The second interview was designed to explore children's methods of persuasion in typical situations involving teacher, mothers and friends. Three different types of situations with parallel variations for each target were presented. For example:

> "Suppose you wanted to watch a TV show and your mother said no. If you really wanted to watch the show, what would you do or say to try to change her mind?"
>
> "Suppose you wanted to see a film in class but your teacher said no. If you wanted to see the film very badly, what would you do or say to try to change the teacher's mind?"

After an initial response, the child was asked, "If that didn't work, what else would you do or say?" Order of story and target presentation were controlled.

In addition, children's perceptions of how the target others would attempt to persuade them in similar situations were assessed. Questions were similar to those described above; again, the child was asked to provide two responses for each of the three situations for mother, teacher and friend.

These answers were recorded verbatim and coded using two different schemes. First, tactics (e.g. threat, bargain) were categorized using a refinement of the codes developed by Braginsky (1970) and Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1968). Second, whenever specific issues (e.g. school performance, good behavior) were mentioned, these were also coded. If a child said "I would

say if you don't let me watch I won't clean up my room," this statement would be recorded as threat (tactic) and housework (issue). Coder reliability has .91 for tactics and .95 for issues.

To determine the correspondence between verbal responses and actual behavior, a subset of the sample, ten first and ten third grade children, were each observed in their classrooms and during recess, mainly on the playgound, for twelve 5 minute segments. Persuasive behaviors involving peers and teachers were coded using the tactic categories explained above.

## Results

### Perception of Others

Data from the first interview indicates that children in both grades were able to provide different information about mothers, teachers and friends. Results suggest that this differentiation is not a function of a clearer perception of individuals in one role as compared to others. The mean number of differing statements was 5.6. A 3(target) x 2(sex) x 2(age) analysis of variance showed no differences in the frequency of number of differing statements by target or age. However, females made significantly more different statements than did males, $F(1,162)=49.17$, $p<.05$ . Analysis of variance of level of specificity of the statements indicated abstract statements were more frequently made about teachers; concrete statements

were more frequently made about mother. The trend toward abstractness is in the expected direction. While there were no differences by grade in the number of concrete statements made, older children frequently made statements of moderate degree of abstractness.

Subjects mentioned a variety of different issues in their description of each of the three roles. Housework (19%), something special (13%) and good behavior (18%) were most often cited as making mothers happy; not doing housework (14%), carelessness (14%), bad behavior (23%) and noncompliance with requests (10%) were most likely to make her angry. For teacher, school performance (11%), finishing work (13%), good behavior (13%) and being quiet (10%) were related to happiness; not finishing work (13%), bad behavior (25%), talking (15%), fighting (12%) and noncompliance with rules (14%) produced anger. Gifts (15%), something special (21%) and playing (25%) are perceived as making friends happy whereas being nasty (16%), fighting (18%), not being friendly (16%) and refusing to play (12%) were most likely to cause anger.

Chi square analysis by grade and sex of the number of children mentioning particular issues for each target revealed no significant differences, suggesting that first and third graders and males and females do not differ in the type of information they are able to share about mothers, teachers and friends.

Strategies for persuading others

Results of 3(target) x 2(sex) x 2(grade) analysis of variance showed the number of different tactics mentioned for persuading others did not differ by grade or sex, but did by target; children used fewer different tactics in persuading teacher as compared to mothers or friends, $F(2, 942.6)=17.19$, $p<.05$. The tactics most frequently employed were bargain or bribe (41%), threat (10%), and simple request "please" (10%). A high number of strategies suggested really involve no persuasion but relied on withdrawal (10%) or finding an alternative (8%). For example, in the story about TV, described previously, children frequently indicated that they might find another set, or decide to not watch at all.

Table 1 presents mean frequencies for persuasion tactics by grade, sex and target as well as significant main effects. It should be noted that very few interactions were found so that only main effects will be discussed. In terms of differences in the particular types of tactics directed at these targets, a 3(target) x 2(grade) x 2(sex) analysis of variance showed main effects for target in that: (a) children are more likely to appeal to others for help when persuading friends, $F(2,19.5)=5.29$, $P<.01$; (b) find alternatives rather than persuade when dealing with mothers, $F(2,52.7)=6.86$, $p<.01$, and (c) are more likely to indicate not knowing what to do when trying to influence teachers, $F(2,278.5)=10.24$, $p<.01$.

Difference for grade indicated that first graders more frequently used simple requests, ("please, please") $F(1,60.3)=14.61$, $p<.01$, appeals to others, $F(1,19.5)=5.94$, $p<.05$, or said they didn't know what they would do, $F(1,278.5)=4.90$, $p<.05$; third graders used bargain, bribe, $F(1,298.3)=4.15$, $p<.05$ and threat, $F(1,70.2)=3.82$, $p<.05$, more often.

Sex differences were found in that (a) males were less able to provide a variety of strategies for persuasion and more frequently mentioned not knowing what to do, $F(1,70.2)=3.82$, $p<.05$, or withdrawing (not doing anything) than did females, $F(1,63.9)=8.76$, $p<.01$.

Tactics Others Use to Persuade

In terms of their perception of tactics others use in persuasion, a 3(target) x 2(grade) x 2(sex) analyses of variance (see Table 2) indicated that children believe: (a) bribes would be used least by teachers, $F(2,240.2)=7.46$, $p<.01$; (b) commands, $F(2,38.0)=3.60$, $p<.05$, and threats, $F(2,13.0)=3.08$, $p<.05$, would be used least often by friends; (c) threat to appeal to another would be used least by mothers, $F(2,13.0)=3.08$, $p<.05$; (d) aggression or threat of aggression would be used least by teachers and most by mothers, $F(2,486)=8.00$, $p<.01$; (e) more children indicated don't know for how to persuade teachers as compared to mother and friends, $F(2,267.3)=11.81$, $p<.01$. Many just said "she would make me" or "I would have to."

TABLE 1
CHILD PERSUADES: MEAN FREQUENCY BY TACTIC FOR GRADE, SEX, AND TARGET

| | Grade | | | Sex | | | Target[a] | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tactic | 1 | 3 | | M | F | | M | T | F | | Total |
| nag | .03 | .05 | | .01 | .07 | ** | .04 | .05 | .03 | | .04 |
| bargain/bribe | .53 | .65 | * | .47 | .68 | ** | .60 | .51 | .64 | | .58 |
| threat | .08 | .15 | * | .09 | .13 | | .11 | .08 | .14 | | .11 |
| appeal to other | .05 | .00 | * | .02 | .04 | | .01 | .01 | .07 | ** | .03 |
| please | .17 | .05 | ** | .11 | .13 | | .12 | .12 | .11 | | .12 |
| no persuasion withdraw | .12 | .10 | | .17 | .07 | ** | .10 | .09 | .14 | | .11 |
| no persuasion -- use other alternative | .07 | .12 | | .11 | .07 | | .16 | .07 | .04 | ** | .09 |
| don't know | .65 | .51 | * | .71 | .47 | ** | .53 | .80 | .45 | ** | .59 |

a -- M=Mother, T=Teacher, F=Friend
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

TABLE 2
OTHERS PERSUADE CHILD: MEAN FREQUENCIES FOR GRADE, SEX, AND TARGET

| | Grade | | | Sex | | | Target[a] | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tactic | 1 | 3 | | M | F | | M | T | F | | Total |
| bargain/bribe | .35 | .63 | ** | .41 | .53 | * | .52 | .31 | .58 | ** | .47 |
| appeal to other | .07 | .02 | * | .02 | .08 | ** | .03 | .06 | .06 | | .05 |
| command | .10 | .04 | ** | .09 | .05 | * | .10 | .09 | .02 | * | .07 |
| please | .17 | .10 | * | .12 | .16 | | .12 | .14 | .16 | | .14 |
| threat (appeal to other) | .04 | .00 | ** | .01 | .03 | | .00 | .03 | .04 | * | .02 |
| threat (aggression) | .07 | .05 | | .06 | .06 | | .12 | .00 | .06 | ** | .06 |
| no persuasion withdrawal | .03 | .05 | | .08 | .00 | ** | .02 | .04 | .06 | | .04 |
| don't know | .61 | .55 | | .71 | .46 | ** | .49 | .80 | .45 | ** | .58 |

a -- M=Mother, T=Teacher, F=Friend
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

Age differences were found in that first graders more frequently reported that when being persuaded appeal to another or threatening to do so, $F(1,486)=8.53$, $p<.01$, commands, $F(1,38)=6.75$, $p<.01$, and saying please, $F(1,75.3)=3.80$, $p<.05$, would be employed. Third graders more frequently stated that bargain and bribe would be used on them, $F(1,240.2)=21.08$ $p<.01$. It is interesting to note that although younger children more frequently mentioned "don't know" when asked how they would persuade, this difference did not occur in their perceptions of how others would persuade them, suggesting that whereas older children are more able to articulate tactics they use, at both grade levels children are equally aware of tactics used on them.

Males more frequently indicated they would be commanded, $F(1,38.0)=4.40$, $p<.05$, did not know how others would persuade them, $F(1,240.2)=5.39$, $p<.05$ or that others would withdraw, $F(1,27.9)=12.60$, $p<.01$. On the other hand, females more frequently mentioned that mothers, teachers, and friends would use bargain/bribe or appealing to others to persuade them, $F(1,240.2)=5.39$, $p<.05$ and $F(1,24.2)=9.08$, $p<.01$ respectively. Overall, whereas there were no main effects for target in terms of the total number of different tactics mentioned, a significant sex x grade interaction, $F(1,291.45)=16.55$, $p<.01$, was found indicating that first grade males used fewer different tactics than any other group.

Issues in persuasion

For specific issues used to persuade a high proportion of children mentioned using housework, gifts, being good for mothers, finishing work and being good for teachers and gifts, doing something special and playing together for friends. The issues mentioned were not closely related to those mentioned in the role perception interview; the latter were expected to represent the issues upon which persuasion tactics would be built. The highest proportion of consistent mentions of particular issues were housework for mothers (22%) and play with friends (29%). A test of the difference in proportions by grade and sex of the number of children using the same issue for mothers, teachers and friends in both the persuasion and role perception interviews indicated differences for use of housework with mother, (females greater than males, $X^2(1)=4.26$, $p<.05$; third greater than first, $X^2(1)=4.66$, $p<.05$); schoolwork with teacher (third greater than first, $X^2(1)=4.86$, $p<.05$); something special (females greater than males, $X^2(1)=5.89$, $p<.05$) and sharing (third greater than first, $X^2(1)=4.18$, $p<.05$) for friends. The general lack of correspondence except for a few issues shows that children are not able to systematically utilize their knowledge of others in attempting to persuade. For example, although good behavior was often mentioned as making mothers and teachers happy, it was rarely used as a bases for persuasion.

When describing how others would persuade them, children were likely to see something special or punishment (particularly hitting) and granting or removing privileges as issues used by mothers; something special, extra schoolwork, privileges and appeals to parents or the principal were used by teachers, whereas gifts, something special, playing or refusal to be friends used by peers. Again, degree of consistency in use of issues was low. Something special for mother and play for friends were the most consistently mentioned issues in children's perception of roles as well as how other persuade. A chi square analysis by grade and sex showed only one difference; more third than first graders were consistent in their perception of something special as important to friends and their mention of these factors as an issue likely to be used by friends in persuading, $X^2(1)=3.85$, $p<.05$.

A total of 25 minutes of classroom observations done in 5 minute segments for 20 children yielded 351 instances of persuasive behavior. The structure of the setting restricted the nature of teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interactions, as demonstrated by the fact that observation for an equal amount of time during recess resulted in more than twice as many persuasive behaviors being record. In general, tactics used with peers matched interview responses. In both locations, simple requests, commands and explanations were used most frequently. Surprisingly, there were few occasions during which

children attempted to persuade teachers; this finding is in accord with the large number of "don't know" responses to questions concerning how children would persuade teachers.

## Conclusion

In summary, results suggest that:

1. First and third graders are able to provide an equal amount of information about significant others they are likely to persuade.

2. Older children tend to make more abstract statements.

3. Perception of issues important to mothers, teachers and friends are similar for males and females and children at both ages.

4. Children differentiate tactics according to targets when persuading and can specify the types of tactics others are likely to use when persuading them as well as describing the issues likely to be invoked.

5. However, by third grade they still are not able to fully utilize their knowledge of others in formulating their own persuasion strategies.

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